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CONTENTS

List of illustrations vi Acknowledgements viii

- 1 Beginnings 1
- 2 The prodigy 25
- 3 First maturity 50
- 4 The Grand Tour 76
- 5 Frustrations in Berlin and Düsseldorf 110
- 6 Scaling the heights in Leipzig 136
- 7 More frustrations in Berlin 163
- 8 Endings 189

Notes 207

Further reading 216

Index 219

ILLUSTRATIONS

- I The Mühlendamm, Berlin, viewed from the Molkenmarkt, with Veitel Heine Ephraim's Palais on the right: steel engraving by Finden after a drawing by Stock page 6
- 2 Moses Mendelssohn, 1786: oil on wood by Johann Christoph Frisch 13
- 3 Napoleon's triumphal 1806 entry through Berlin's Brandenburg Gate: anonymous engraving 27
- 4 The twelve-year-old Felix at the keyboard, drawn by his future brother-in-law, Wilhelm Hensel 38
- 5 Fanny in 1829, affectionately rendered by Wilhelm Hensel 65
- 6 Karl Friedrich Schinkel's perspective drawing of his 1818 design for the new Singakademie 73
- 7 Europe in 1815 77
- 8 Mendelssohn as dandy in 1829: oil painting by James Warren Childe 81
- 9 Engraving of Staffa from Thomas Pennant, Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides, MDCCLXXII, vol. 2 86
- First page of the manuscript of Mendelssohn's 'Italian'Symphony 116
- 11 Pencil drawing of the composer at age twenty-five by his friend and landlord, Wilhelm Schadow 128
- 12 Interior of the Gewandhaus: watercolour by Gottlob Theuerkauf 139
- 13 Cécile Mendelssohn Bartholdy: oil painting by Eduard Magnus 152
- 14 Prince Albert playing the organ before Queen Victoria and Mendelssohn at Buckingham Palace 174
- 15 A Philharmonic Society concert in the Hanover Square Rooms, London, from the Illustrated London News, 24 June 1843 185
- 16 Mendelssohn's pencil drawing of his family on vacation at Soden in September 1844 187
- 17 Mendelssohn conducting Elijah in Birmingham, from the Illustrated London News, 29 August 1846 196

18 Mendelssohn on his deathbed, drawn by his friend Eduard Bendemann 206

Sources

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1 Beginnings

What a history! — A fugitive from Egypt and Palestine, here I am and find help, love, fostering in you people. With real rapture I think of these origins of mine and this whole nexus of destiny, through which the oldest memories of the human race stand side by side with the latest developments.

Rahel Varnhagen on her deathbed, 18331

Towards the end of the Gregorian Calendar's year 1811, a young Jewish couple, Lea and Abraham Mendelssohn, left the city of Hamburg with their three children and a sizeable sum of money. They fled in disguise at night, knowing that, had the French authorities seen fit to detain them and had recognised Abraham for who he was, the whole destiny of their growing family might be thrown into question. Their oldest child, Fanny, was seven at the time, the youngest, Rebecka, only a few months. Between these was the two-year-old Felix.

Abraham, like many Hamburg bankers and business people, had made a small fortune underwriting the traffic of contraband through the port city, defying the trade blockade through which Napoleon had sought, since 1806, to cripple the English economy. In 1811, with the terrifying results of increased French military presence attending the arrival of Marshal Louis Davôust, many came to sense that the rewards no longer outweighed the risks. Luckier than many, the Mendelssohns escaped without incident. Their arrival in Berlin

signalled the beginning of a happy, prosperous period for the family that would not end until the deaths of the two oldest children – Fanny and Felix – within a few months of each other in 1847.

The sketchy familial records of the flight from Hamburg leave no indication how much Fanny – much less Felix – understood about the dangers of the trip they were undertaking. But the whole passage must have been surrounded with a sense of grand adventure similar to that surrounding the trip that their paternal grandfather, Moses, had made to Berlin almost seventy years before. His circumstances, however, could not have been more different. The fourteen-year-old Moses made the eighty-mile trip from his hometown of Dessau on foot, with few prospects and, as the story goes, only a single gold ducat to his name. His intelligence and passion for learning were his sole resources. Abraham's family, by contrast, arrived with considerable means, seeking a stable economic and social environment within which to further their financial prosperity, to educate their children, and to enjoy a fuller civic integration than even their fortunate forebears had. Where Moses had headed straight to Berlin's Jewish ghetto -the only conceivable destination for an impoverished Jew - Abraham and his family moved within a few years into one of the city's finest residences. For Moses, Berlin was a city of strangers, with the exception of the teacher he had followed there. By 1811, members of Abraham and Lea's families had been established and respected figures in the community for decades. Within two years of their arrival, Abraham had become a member of Berlin's town council (though not its first Jewish member; David Friedländer had enjoyed that distinction); the Mendelssohn home, around the figure of the gifted, superbly educated Lea, became a regular meeting place for Prussia's leading intellectual and cultural figures. In Lea and Abraham's harrowing flight from Hamburg to Berlin-from a position of fear and instability to one of security and prosperity, from a fast-paced port city to Prussia's conservative heart – we may perceive an encapsulation of their families' generation-spanning quest, along with countless German Jews, for self-actualisation and social acceptance. For Abraham's family, this quest had begun with Moses' decision, in October 1743, to set out for the Prussian capital.

The driving cliché of Felix Mendelssohn biographies since his own lifetime has been his life's almost total lack of conflict or adversity. He was born into circumstances as comfortable as almost any German citizen, and in such circumstances he remained for his entire life. But if Felix's life story in no way represents a struggle with adversity, it is no less crucial to recognise in it the consequences of such a struggle, one that had gone on for two generations.

It is impossible to gauge the accuracy of the quotation at the beginning of this chapter. These words were ostensibly pronounced by Rahel Varnhagen – the pole-star of Berlin salon culture at its height, who was considered by many intellectuals and dignitaries 'the greatest woman on earth' - on her deathbed. 2 They were recorded after her death by Rahel's husband, Karl August Varnhagen von Ense (a Christian by birth). But however literally authentic these words may be, they ascribe to Rahel a psychological point of arrival that affirms a telos of happy, unproblematic assimilation. The familiar story of the life of Felix's grandfather, Moses, doubtless contains elements of mythology, most of its known details not committed to paper until after his death (his own humility was no help in the matter: 'My biographical data', he wrote by way of preface to the scantiest of autobiographical sketches, 'have actually always seemed so unimportant to me that I never bothered to keep a record of them'3). But Moses' life story remains one of the most important biographical narratives of the Jewish emancipation, and in this sense a critical point of reference for understanding the motivations, desires and fears that shaped the Mendelssohn family's experience throughout the beginning of the nineteenth century. Crucial to an understanding of the exuberance with which Felix's parents embraced the cultural and intellectual possibilities inherent in their financial advantages was the knowledge that these advantages were hard fought, and unthinkable a few decades before.

*

On Elul 12, 5489 – the day the Christians called 6 September 1729 – Felix's grandfather, Moses Dessau, was born in the town from which he would take his name, a town whose population of 0,500 included around 150 Jewish families. His mother, Sarah Bela Rahel, was the daughter of one of Dessau's most distinguished Jewish families, claiming among her ancestors the famous - indeed, semi-legendary -Saul Wahl, said to have ruled as King of Poland for a single night. Moses' father, Menahem Mendel, was a minor official in the Synagogue. By the end of his career, he had risen to the position of teacher and scribe, which brought with it a good deal more respect than money. It was from Menahem that Moses received his earliest education and, we may assume, his life-long passion for the written word. After he had mastered the basics of Hebrew script, Moses' education was entrusted to the Beth Hamidrash, the school whose field of enquiry was limited to the Talmud and its commentaries. As a foil to the dry arcana of these studies, Moses was drawn by his own passion and curiosity to the Bible. Reports of his prodigious capacity for memorising lengthy passages of the Hebrew Scripture would reverberate, two generations later, through the preternatural feats of musical memorisation ascribed to his grandchildren, Fanny and Felix.

Around the age of thirteen, Moses came across a work which proved pivotal to the development of his young mind, Moses Maimonides' More Nevukhhim, the Guide of the Perplexed. Completed in 1190, this challenging volume – intended, as its author indicates, for 'thinkers whose studies have brought them into collision with religion'⁴ – confronted openly the difficulties of reconciling reason and faith. A ban set forth in 1305 had forbidden the reading of this book by anyone under the age of twenty-five. While Moses consumed Maimonides' text voraciously, this transgression was not without its consequences. It was at about this time that he contracted a severe illness, probably a tubercular infection, which resulted in lifelong spinal curvature. 'Maimon', he would later recall, 'weakened my body but invigorated my soul'.

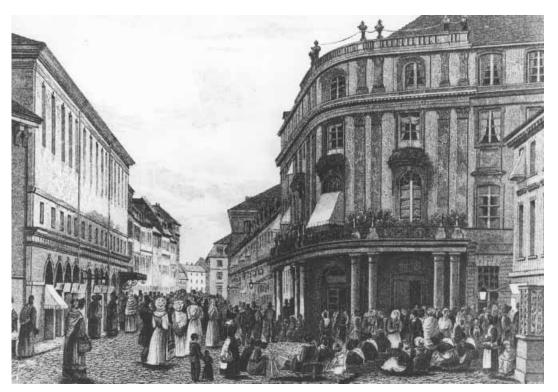
Moses was soon hit with a second blow: his teacher, R. David

Fränkel, had been summoned to Berlin to serve as Chief Rabbi. A strict disciplinarian and a scholar of legendary energy – his students recalled that he often arose at midnight to work on his path-breaking commentary on the Jerusalem Talmud – Fränkel was admired and beloved by his students, in whose well-being he took the keenest interest. As sad as the departure of his teacher might be in itself, Moses also had practical matters to consider: having recently undergone his bar-mitzvah, he was expected to begin earning a living. Without trade, skill or family money, the most likely course ahead was the life of a pedlar. With this depressing prospect in view, Moses set about persuading his family to allow him to follow Fränkel to Berlin to continue his studies. After lengthy negotiations – some reports say four months' worth – they agreed.

In the autumn of 1743, as we have seen, the young Moses arrived in Berlin. He probably paid his Liebzahl, the 'body tax' required of all Jews crossing a frontier or entering a city, and received his paper Passierscheine ('pass') authorising his presence in the city. From here, he sought out the squalid blocks that were home to the great bulk of the city's Jewish population. Though not the gated, physically isolated ghetto that Jews had occupied prior to their expulsion in 1572, the new Jewish settlement — a region between the Spree and the Neue Friedrichstrasse which actually overlapped with the parishes of several Christian churches—was still crowded and disease-ridden.⁵

Fränkel did all he could to sustain the boy; he found dwelling for Moses in an attic room of a merchant, Hayyim Bamberg, and paid him what little he could to copy his own scholarly work. Apart from the free weekly meals that certain charitable Jewish families offered students, Moses' diet for each week of the next several years, so the story goes, consisted of a single loaf of bread, which he would notch into daily portions at the beginning of the week.

Through these years, Moses continued his religious studies with Fränkel with unchecked enthusiasm. But the same hunger for knowledge that had led him to the Bible in earlier years drove him, through his student days in Berlin, towards vast realms of European secular



ı The Mühlendamm, Berlin, viewed from the Molkenmarkt, with Veitel Heine Ephraim's Palais on the right: steel engraving by Finden after a drawing by Stock

culture – literature, philosophy, science and mathematics – far beyond those permitted by local Jewish authorities. If the physical lines circumscribing the Jews' permissible places of residence were drawn from without, the religious, intellectual and cultural lines that separated the beleaguered Jewish community from the Christian world were drawn, and drawn firmly, from within. At stake was the community's very self-definition. Nonetheless, in private hours in his garret, Moses sailed far beyond the intellectual horizon of the ghetto, taking up a dual residency, as it were, in his Jewish surroundings and in the European intellectual tradition that was, for most Jews, a closed book.

At this time, Germany's Jewish children were, by and large, taught only Yiddish, rarely the native tongue of the surrounding city. This was the first frontier into which Moses set forth: having picked up a bit of German from Rabbi Fränkel, he worked his tireless way through a tome of Protestant historical theology, Gustav Reinbeck's Betrachtungen über die Augsburgische Confession, which had happened to fall into his hands. Though he had soon mastered the language and begun to reap the rich rewards of his labour, he was not ignorant of the attendant risks. He was helpless to intervene when a boy three years younger than himself, whom Moses had been tutoring, was caught by the Jewish authorities with a German book he had been fetching for Moses. The younger boy was ejected from the city.

Word spread around the Jewish community of the brilliant young scholar, whose physical infirmity — his hunched back and the stammer he had had since youth — only added to his fascination. A number of gifted, sympathetic allies soon fell across his path. He found a tutor in logic, geometry and medieval Jewish philosophy (Maimonides was still an important presence) in the philosopher/mathematician Israel Samoscz, recently driven out of Poland for his progressive religious ideas. Abraham Kisch, the well-educated product of a wealthy Prague family, gave him his first lessons in Latin. Around his seventeenth year, Moses attracted the attention of another young man, six years his senior, who was to prove pivotal not only in

his education, but in drawing Mendelssohn into the mainstream of Berlin's cultural affairs. Aron Salomon Gumpertz – an aspiring student of the Humanities who would end up in medical school at the University of Frankfurt-an-der-Oder – was the scion of a wealthy Jewish Berlin family. He not only opened to Moses the French and English languages, but made available to him works by the leading philosophers of the time, Leibniz and Wolff, and discreetly invited Moses into a group of philosophically minded masters and pupils at a Gentile public school.

In his twenty-first year, Mendelssohn was offered a position as tutor to the children of the wealthy Jewish silk manufacturer Isaac Bernhard, a post which allowed him to reap a modicum of financial stability from his intellectual achievements. An equally important benefit of Mendelssohn's new position was the fact that, as an employee of a Schutzjude, he was relieved of the constant fear of expulsion from the city. He would not receive his own Schutzbrief (letter of protection) until 1763. (In supporting Mendelssohn's appeal for protection, the Marquis d'Argens - who had come to know and admire Mendelssohn – wrote to King Friedrich: 'A philosopher who is a bad Catholic hereby begs a philosopher who is a bad Protestant to grant a favour to a philosopher who is a bad Jew. There's too much philosophy involved in all of this for reason not to side with my request. '6) And the granting of Mendelssohn's own Schutzbrief was itself only a limited victory. In a charter of 1750, Friedrich had placed restrictions on, among other things, the lot of many Schutzjuden, distinguishing a class of 'irregular' protected Jews who did not pass their privilege on to their children. This was the class Mendelssohn joined in 1763, his children remaining unprotected until 1787, the year after his – and, more to the point, Friedrich's – death.

Four years after Mendelssohn took the post of tutor in the Bernhard home, as the children outgrew the need for his services, Isaac Bernhard was sufficiently impressed by the young man to entrust to him the post of book-keeper and correspondent in the family silk factory. This institution was to provide Mendelssohn with financial

stability for the rest of his life. He became the factory's manager upon Bernhard's retirement, entering into a full partnership, after Bernhard's death, with his widow. Though Mendelssohn occasionally lamented the stifling drudgery of his business affairs – 'A good book-keeper', he wrote in 1758, '. . . should be given a medal for divesting himself of his mind, wit, and all emotion, turning himself into a clod so as to keep his books in order'7 – he was well aware that his lot might have been immeasurably worse.

By the time Mendelssohn took up this post, his friend and former tutor, Gumpertz, had become secretary to the Marquis d'Argent, whose influence, as a close associate of Friedrich the Great, on Mendelssohn's behalf we have already seen. Under Gumpertz's guidance, Mendelssohn found himself moving in Berlin's highest intellectual and cultural circles, through which his reputation spread quickly. It was during this time that he made what was perhaps his closest lifelong friendship, with critic and playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Lessing's early comedy, The Jews, had just appeared, its brilliant and morally upstanding protagonist probably based on Gumpertz himself. Years later, Lessing would immortalise his friend Mendelssohn, too, in the title character of his play, Nathan the Wise, an articulate, powerful dramatic plea for religious toleration.

In 1755, Lessing edited and published Mendelssohn's Philosophical Conversations (Philosophische Gespräche), a dialogue between two friends on various philosophical matters. Later that year came Mendelssohn's contribution to the newly formed discipline of aesthetics, Letters on the Sentiments (Briefe über die Empfindungen), whose 'language of the heart' critics praised at once. Though both of these works were published anonymously, and Mendelssohn's footing in the German language was not yet sure enough to move without Lessing's close editorial guidance, the Letters on the Sentiments earned its author a solid position in German letters. In the years that followed, Mendelssohn, Lessing and publisher Friedrich Nicolai became important critical proponents of German literature, denouncing the pervasive French dominance that found its wellspring in the royal

court itself. In their journal Literaturbriefe, Mendelssohn even went so far as to publish a Germanophilic critique of a volume of Friedrich the Great's own collected verse, Poésies diverses. In his successful defence against the inevitable trouble that followed – a denouncement by Johann Gottlieb Heinrich von Justi, a founder of German political science, prompted a brief ban of the Literaturbriefe – Mendelssohn is said to have written, with characteristic deftness and tact, that 'Writing poetry is like bowling, in that whoever bowls, whether king or peasant, must have the pinboy tell him his score'.

In 1762, with his fame spreading quickly and his financial circumstances relatively secure, the thirty-two-year-old Mendelssohn met the woman he would fall in love with and marry. Fromet Gugenheim, the daughter of a Hamburg merchant whose once-prosperous family had fallen on hard times, was a friend of both Gumpertz's fiancée and one of the Bernhard daughters. Initially shocked by Moses' ugliness, Fromet is said to have been won over by an encounter which, though impossible to document, is emblematic of the sensitivity and prodigious cleverness ascribed to Mendelssohn in the many stories around which his semi-mythical persona was crystallising. Sensing her repulsion at his physical appearance, the story goes, Mendelssohn turned the conversation to the question of whether marriage partners were fore-ordained in heaven:

When I was born, my future wife was also named, but at the same time it was said, Alas! she will have a dreadful humpback. O God, I said then, a deformed girl will become embittered and unhappy, whereas she should be beautiful. Dear Lord, give me the humpback, and let the maiden be well made and agreeable!

Fromet embraced Mendelssohn, and the engagement was soon announced.

The pair were married that June, and appear to have enjoyed an agreeable life together. The Bernhards insisted on underwriting the decoration of the couple's new house on Spandau Street, in which the Mendelssohns would spend the entirety of their married life. Of eight

children, six survived to adulthood, including three daughters – Brendel (later Dorothea), Recha, and Henriette – and three sons – Joseph, Abraham and Nathan.

The Mendelssohns' house soon came to be known for regular evening gatherings that formed a nexus of the city's intellectual activities. Berlin's most distinguished citizenry could be found side by side with impoverished students or travellers eager for a look at the famous 'Jew of Berlin'. Though Moses, contemporaries recall, often said little at these gatherings, his contributions were judicious and compassionate when they came.

Mendelssohn's international reputation was secured once and for all with the 1767 publication of his Phaidon or On Immortality, in three dialogues. Moving from a partial translation of Plato's Phaedo into Mendelssohn's own meditations, Phaidon captivated its initial audience both through its considerable literary beauty and its effort to reconstitute traditional religious certainties through the very philosophical language whose stark rationality had threatened to bankrupt them. Phaidon became one of the most widely read books of its time, soon translated into every major European language. Proclaimed the 'German Socrates', Mendelssohn secured at a stroke a reputation as one of the leading philosophical minds of his generation.

Throughout this time, Mendelssohn had struggled to distance his intellectual life from his religious one. Though it was perhaps inevitable that his religion should ultimately be brought into a public forum, the transition might have been a smoother one. The catalyst for this transition came in the person of Johann Caspar Lavater, the young Zürich deacon known both as a tireless Christian proselytiser and as the inventor of the science of phrenology. Lavater had admired Moses for years, having visited the Mendelssohns' home for the first time in 1763. Six years later, he dedicated his German translation of Charles Bonnet's Palingénésie philosophique – an apologia for the revelatory foundations of Christian dogma – to Mendelssohn, proclaiming that Moses should either embrace Christianity or publicly refute it.

Mendelssohn published a quiet, dignified response, assuring his Christian interlocutor that he would have abandoned Judaism long before if he were not fully convinced of its truth. At the same time he adumbrated the underpinnings of an argument for religious tolerance that would strongly inform his later writings, claiming that the religious laws of Judaism, though strictly binding for the Jew, did not apply to others, and that the essential doctrines of his faith were demonstrably universal in their validity:

Why should I convert a Confucius or a Solon? As he does not belong to the Congregation of Jacob, my religious laws do not apply to him; and on doctrines, we should soon come to an understanding. Do I think there is a chance of his being saved? I certainly believe that he who leads mankind on to virtue in this world cannot be damned in the next.9

Lavater replied with contrition, and further exchanges between the two authors were conciliatory. But the controversy left in its wake a flurry of pamphlets and editorials on the issue of Judaism which placed Mendelssohn, clearly the moral victor, at centre stage.

The strain of the whole experience proved too much for Mendelssohn's frail, nervous constitution. Writing and reading now brought on blackouts and fits of dizziness. Over the seven years that followed, Mendelssohn withdrew from public affairs almost entirely, reading and producing little. His grandson, Felix, inherited Moses' constitution, and was suffering similar complaints at an even younger age. Had Felix responded as Moses did – and he contemplated similar measures – his life would almost certainly have been a good deal longer.

Upon re-entry into public life, Mendelssohn seems to have recognised that, for better or worse, his position in Europe's public affairs brought with it an obligation to play his part in bettering the lot of the Jewish people, a task he pursued diligently for the remainder of his life. He soon proved himself, among other things, an articulate and effective intercessor on behalf of Jewish communities throughout Europe threatened with persecution or expulsion. An important



2 Moses Mendelssohn, 1786: oil on wood by Johann Christoph Frisch

testament to the heightened profile – largely due to Mendelssohn's influence – of the Jewish plight in public discourse was the appearance of Christian Wilhelm Dohm's Upon the Civil Amelioration of the Jews in 1781. This work seems to have been composed in response to Mendelssohn's request that Dohm, a twenty-nine-year-old Christian admirer of Mendelssohn, intercede with Louis XVI on behalf of the bitterly oppressed Jews of Alsace.

Mendelssohn's own publications also displayed a new commitment to improving the lot of European Jewry. His 1778 condensation of the Hoshen hamishpat, the Ritual Laws of the Jews, helped to establish a new spirit of judicious mutual understanding between Jewish communities and the German authorities who monitored them. To the consternation of Jewish elders across the German-speaking world, Mendelssohn also undertook a new German translation of the Hebrew scriptures, completing – with a handful of assistants – the Pentateuch, Ecclesiastes, the Psalms and the Song of Solomon (the last only discovered among his papers after his death). The importance of the publication of Mendelssohn's Pentateuch to the generations that followed is inestimable, particularly in the role it played in bringing the German language into everyday Jewish life.

In 1783 Mendelssohn completed his most important philosophical work, Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism, a sustained explication of his decision to remain Jewish despite the apparent allure of Christianity on the one hand, and of atheistic rationality on the other. Immanuel Kant, whose Critique of Pure Reason had signalled the twilight of enlightenment philosophy, pronounced Jerusalem 'irrefutable', observing that Mendelssohn had 'demonstrated the necessity of unlimited freedom of conscience for every religion with such thoroughness and lucidity that, on our side, the Church too will have to consider how to sort out whatever can burden and press the conscience, which in the end must tend to unite man in respect of the essential points of religion'.

Jerusalem was to be the last major work Mendelssohn completed. He caught a chill on the last day of 1785, and died four days later of an apoplexy of the brain, mourned by the Jewish and gentile community alike. His intelligence, graciousness and dignity had abolished the perception of Jews as dishonest and uneducable by their very nature, prejudices on which the entire political and economic subjugation of European Jewry was based. At the same time, he had demonstrated to Jews themselves not only the feasibility of full engagement with the Christian world, but that assimilation into Christian society was

not predicated on the dilution, much less the rejection, of one's faith.

The political ramifications of Mendelssohn's pleas for religious tolerance were immense, though more discernible outside of his native Prussia than within. The enlightened Emperor Joseph II was almost certainly influenced heavily by Dohm's Upon the Civil Amelioration of the Jews in his decision to issue the 'Toleranzpatent' of 1782, which brought about the gradual lifting of laws oppressing the Jews. Shortly after Mendelssohn's death, the French Count Honoré de Mirabeau expressed his deep respect for his life and work in the book, Sur Moses Mendelssohn et sur la réforme politique des Juifs. Mirabeau would prove instrumental in obtaining for the Jews the civil liberties which the French Revolution accomplished for the Christian populace, assured through a formal declaration by the French National Assembly on 27 September 1791. 'It is fortunate for us', Moses had once remarked, 'that no one can insist on the rights of man without at the same time espousing our own rights'. ¹⁰

*

In the course of his life, Moses Mendelssohn had neither sought nor attained more than a modest living. But he had created for his children an environment in which it was possible for them to seek degrees of both financial empowerment and social status which Moses himself could hardly have dreamed of in his own youth. By the time of Fromet's death in 1812, she had watched her children take their places among the more affluent members of northern Europe's emerging middle class, while making inroads into Paris's and Berlin's most influential intellectual and cultural circles. Fromet and Moses had provided their children with the most thorough education their means could afford, including exposure to philosophy, literature, religion and mathematics, Moses himself playing an active role in the education of the two oldest, Brendel and Joseph. While the intelligence and prudence of the sons wrought tremendous financial gains in banking, it was the daughters of the family who succeeded in carrying on the spirit of their father's quiet conquest of the European

cultural world, as members of a generation that radically redefined the possibilities of the female intellectual life. The heady vitality of the turn-of-the-century salon culture in which Moses' daughters immersed themselves would flow directly – if in more measured supply – into the childhood home of their nephew, Felix.

If Moses exercised a forward-looking even-handedness in his approach to his daughters' education, the same could not be said of his attitude towards their marriages. As tradition dictated, he had arranged marriages for two of his daughters, Brendel and Recha, though both would abandon these relationships; Henriette never married.

As if pressing to an extreme her father's struggle for tolerance and heightened freedoms for his co-religionists, Brendel's refusal to be governed by tradition extended to almost every aspect of her social, intellectual and religious life. Emblematic was her rejection of the very name her parents had given her in exchange for the more romantic 'Dorothea'. In spite of a physical plainness – 'There was nothing about Dorothea to entice one to sensuality', her friend Henrietta Herz reported – her forthright manner and staggering erudition won her friends among Berlin's intellectual elite. Soon after her marriage to the young banker, Simon Veit, in 1783, the twentyyear-old Dorothea took up her parents' practice of holding regular evening gatherings at her home, involving a loose and expanding circle of literary and intellectual acquaintances. About the same time, two of Dorothea's closest friends, Rahel Levin (later Varnhagen) and Henrietta Herz, also established salons. As the century neared its close, it was in the houses of these three young Jewish women that Berlin's most elevated conversations were carried out among philosophers, theologians and literati as diverse as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich and Wilhelm Schlegel, and Alexander and Wilhelm Humboldt (the last pair had been frequent visitors at Moses and Fromet's house, and would be well known in Abraham's).

It was the dubious charms of the younger Schlegel brother, Friedrich, that would finally draw Dorothea out of this tight-knit community – indeed, out of the fabric of her own family. By the time Dorothea and Friedrich met in 1789, it was patently clear that her husband Simon, though a gracious personality and a stalwart provider, was in no way equal to his wife in intellect or adventurousness. In the course of the decade that followed, members of their circle became aware that Dorothea had discovered both intellectual and physical satiety in the gifted, if undisciplined, Friedrich. When the situation was finally made known to Simon Veit, he not only agreed to free Dorothea from a marriage that must have come to seem burdensome to both of them, but granted her custody of their two sons, providing a modicum of financial support for their upkeep. Perhaps as a result of the general censure – the arrangement raised eyebrows even among their most liberal-minded friends – Dorothea and Friedrich left, yet unmarried, for Jena, where Friedrich had obtained a position as lecturer.

Through the years that followed, which appear to have been some of the happiest of her life, Dorothea established another thriving salon. While Friedrich's output remained erratic, Dorothea herself turned her hand with considerable success to literature and literary criticism. In answer to Friedrich's Lucinde, an uneven and shockingly immodest novelistic testament to their relationship, Dorothea produced her own novel, Florentin (a projected second volume was never published). This book received considerably greater acclaim from contemporary readers than Friedrich's work, and led to a string of translations, historical narratives and critical articles through which Dorothea sought to stabilise the family's always precarious financial situation.

If her family had been scandalised from the start by her union with Schlegel, they were dealt a second blow with Dorothea's decision to convert—as thousands of Jews did in the first years of the century—to Protestantism, thus removing a technical obstacle to her second marriage. Dorothea was the first member of her immediate family, though she would not be the last, to turn away from the injunction her father had set forth in Jerusalem: 'As long as we cannot demonstrate any authentic liberation from the Law, all our sophistries cannot free us

from the strict obedience which we owe to the Law'. Her Protestant wedding to Schlegel took place in Paris, shortly after the couple's move there in 1804.

Dorothea and Friedrich's home soon came to house one of Paris's most celebrated salons, but the family's apparent contentment through the years that followed proved fragile. In 1808, the couple converted to Catholicism, leaving Paris for Cologne, then Cologne for Vienna, where Friedrich had secured a minor court position. Though Dorothea continued attending salons in Vienna, the humiliations of the Napoleonic Wars had dampened spirits in the city, and Friedrich and Dorothea's own best days seemed to be behind them. One source of solace for Dorothea through these years was watching her two sons establish considerable reputations in the art world, consolidating at the same time the family's total commitment to their new faith. As a member of the so-called 'Nazarenes' in Rome, Philipp came to be known as one of Germany's most important painters of New Testament imagery. After the 1829 death of Friedrich – who by then had become corpulent and, by many accounts, shiftless - Dorothea moved to Frankfurt to spend her last decade with Philipp. In the final years of her life, she would see a great deal of her nephew, Felix – who admired her - and the Frankfurt woman he married; Dorothea was the only member of Felix's family to attend his wedding in 1837. She died two years later, on 3 August 1839.

If it is possible to view Dorothea's turbulent life, particularly in retrospect, as a glamorous expression of a gifted, Romantic imagination, more glamorous still was the career of her younger sister, Henriette. Henriette, too, came to intellectual maturity in the Berlin salons, finding a lifelong friend and confidante in the brilliant Rahel Levin. Like her father, Henriette's first employment was as a tutor to the children of a wealthy Jewish family, an offer which took her to Vienna in 1799. She spent the first decade of the nineteenth century in Paris, where she took up residence with her brother, Abraham, who was working in a Jewish banking house called Fould's. In spare rooms of the Foulds' mansion, Henriette set up a school for girls, hosting,

too, her own highly successful evening salon. As one might expect, conversation frequently consisted of delicate negotiations between French and German political perspectives, in which Henriette needed every ounce of the tact she had inherited from her father. Varnhagen von Ense, the diplomat who would later become Rahel Levin's husband, recalled fondly the attractions of this institution in 1810, describing its gracious leader in terms reminiscent of those through which many described her father:

Although plain and slightly deformed, she was nevertheless attractive in appearance, at once gentle, firm, modest, and confident in her whole nature. She had a quick intelligence, wide knowledge, clear judgement, the most refined courtesy, and the choicest tact.

She was well acquainted with the literature of Germany, France, and England, also to some extent of Italy, and spoke French and English like a native. Such qualities could not lack a noble circle of acquaintances, which, however, she sought to limit as much as possible, on account of the duties of her school. As long as Madame de Staël dared to remain in Paris, she came very often to Fräulein Mendelssohn's; so did Benjamin Constant. I first saw Madame de Constant at her house. Madame Fould, who occupied the house in front of the garden, sometimes took her guest to visit her pleasant neighbours. Spontini sat there with us for whole evenings in the moonlight meditating on new laurels to be added to those just won by his 'Vestale'...¹¹

As distinguished a figure as Henriette had become by her thirty-sixth year, she could hardly have anticipated the opportunity that was to draw her away from this existence. In 1812, she accepted an offer to undertake the education of Fanny Sébastiani, the only daughter of the widowed Count Horace Sébastiani, a celebrated former general who had served under Napoleon, and would go on to become a marshal. Henriette would hold the post until Fanny's marriage thirteen years later.

Despite the splendour of her new lifestyle – she and Fanny scraped by, with the help of four servants, in the hotel next to the emperor's,